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### French symbolist poetry and the idea of music

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French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music. By JOSEPH ACQUISTO. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006. vii + 194 pp. Hb £50.00.

In the last two of its four chapters, this book does something rather daring and unusual. It examines the poetic theory and practice of two late Symbolists, René Ghil and Jean Royère, who are generally considered inferior poets and whose work has been little read for the last half century; not in order to rehabilitate them (Acquisto does not hesitate to describe their poems as failures), nor simply in order to put them in their literary historical place, but to look for the instructive flaws in their poetic reasoning. Taking it as axiomatic that we believe Baudelaire and Mallarmé produced better poetry than Royère and Ghil, Acquisto tries to show why; where, exactly, the difference lies. He finds it by contrasting the dogmatism of Ghil and Royère with a certain openness in their great predecessors: 'successful writers are ultimately those whose works yield themselves easily to inventive recombinations and rereadings' (p. 157). This, in itself, is perhaps not an original insight. However, it is arrived at through a thoroughly original analysis of how these poets use the concept of music. Roughly summarized: in reading Baudelaire and Mallarmé, it often becomes difficult to say exactly what music is, where it starts and stops, whether or not it is to be identified with its physical manifestation as musical notes; nonetheless, there is also a constant movement to distance music from poetry, as poetry's other, whether or not it also seems an ideal goal. Acquisto demonstrates this ambiguous distinction of music through careful investigation of the dynamics of reading which the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé invites, playing on the functions of memory, and increasingly requiring the reader to engage performatively with the text. Ghil and Royère, on the other hand, fail to maintain the distinctiveness, the distance of music, the distance between music and poetry. Worse still, the collapse of that distance is

followed by a general collapse of the functions of metaphor and synecdoche, so that similarity is no longer distinguished from identity. In Royère's writing, 'pure poetry is musicism, musicism is poetry, poetry is music and is also life, in addition to being language and the rhythm of language' (p. 130). This dogmatic indistinction is fatal to the symbolist idea of poetry. It is therefore hardly suprising, Acquisto implies, that Royère largely gave up writing about literature and turned instead to pro-Mussolini propaganda. Acquisto's book is not without its faults at the level of detail (including occasional errors in quotation and questionable translation), but the general argument becomes steadily more engrossing and persuasive as it progresses. It is refreshing to read a work that addresses so carefully the question of how poetry created its own values in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially when it also asks why those values ceased to be productive for poets, and yet remain highly functional for readers today.

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472 words